



**Testimony on Senate Bill 1094
AN ACT CONCERNING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF READING MODELS OR
PROGRAMS**

Superintendent Susan Austin of Groton Public Schools

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Dear Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and Honorable Members of the Education Committee:

I am Susan Austin, Superintendent of Groton Public School, home of the First and Finest Submarine Base in the World, and serving the largest military child population in the state of Connecticut. I am pleased to have an opportunity to testify before you today regarding a specific education-related proposal regarding the Right-to-Read legislation on your agenda; **Senate Bill 1094, An Act Concerning the Implementation of Reading Models or Programs.**

Groton Public Schools hosts the largest military student population in the state of Connecticut, at approximately 1200 students. Every submariner in the US Navy will be stationed here at some point during their military career. Military children typically attend between seven to nine schools before graduation, moving approximately every two years. Each relocation brings with it numerous challenges associated with transition between different education systems and communities. As Groton's Superintendent, and a submariner's daughter, I understand what it means to be a Navy Junior after attending eight schools in twelve years in six states. Groton also serves a large number of students who are non-military, who move often, town to town in southeastern CT - between Groton, Norwich, and New London. It's not unusual for 400 students to move out of district, and another 400 students move into district each year.

Despite these hurdles, Groton has a proven track record of meeting both social-emotional and academic needs of all of our students, including those who are transient, military-connected, or considered to be high-needs. We commend our students and their teachers for the growth they make each year. Despite the many moves our students must make and all the academic and social changes that accompany those transitions, they persist and often do well according to our data, which includes multiple schools of distinction every year and two National Blue Ribbon awards since 2016. I am acutely aware that learning to read is fundamental to school success, as are my colleagues, and no goal is more important to success in school than becoming an independent reader, capable of reading grade-level material by the end of third grade. Because of its impact on so many facets of children's lives, including social and emotional issues, school attendance, and dropout rates, when it comes to reading, failure to read is not an option.

At the beginning of this current school year, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona sent a letter to all teachers and administrators recommending that we use state data carefully to assist educators in supporting students. Dr. Cardona stated in his letter, “The last two years have had a profound impact on our students and schools. National data released from the National Assessment of Educational Progress confirm this impact.” Dr. Cardona goes on to say he is concerned about disproportionate impacts for students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students experiencing homelessness, and migratory students. The reason for the decline in scores nationally, state-wide, and locally is due to a world-wide pandemic and interrupted education. Clearly, as school district leaders, we have work to do. We acknowledge that all students reading independently by the end of grade 3 is essential and we share the concern that too many of our students are not there yet. Many students have missed opportunities for instruction the past several years, but educators across the state and nation are working overtime to meet their needs. We embrace this challenge!

My concerns around CT Right to READ legislation and the state’s interpretation of it:

1. Connecticut has always been a state with high quality education standards, the Connecticut Core Standards (CCS), delivered by well-educated and dedicated teachers. The proposed legislation is disrespectful of teachers, administrators, and Boards of Education, taking from us the autonomy as community leaders and professional educators to assess students and teach responsively, drawing on a repertoire of professional learning, model programs, and exemplary literacy tools and books to meet the needs of each and every student. As researcher Doug Reeves points out, the greatest influence on student achievement is teacher quality, and the greatest threat to teacher quality is the potential hemorrhage of good and great teachers from the profession. This legislation and state department could potentially drive good to great educators from our state.
2. While the intention of legislators and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) is based on what they deem as evidence-based instruction, the six mandated basal commercial reading programs have no evidence that any of these programs work. These mandates will not bring students to the ambitious levels of our state standards, and probably won’t accomplish the goal of having every student reading independently by grade 3. The only evidence these programs rely on is evidence from a very few number of children, in a laboratory setting. When a student is drilled discrete phonics skills repeatedly, the student may repeat the skill, but may not transfer that knowledge into reading and writing. Will they ultimately become readers and writers? There is zero data to show that they will. It is unlikely that schools implementing these huge and expensive programs will out-perform schools continuing to develop their own model curriculum aligned to CCS and the Science of Reading (SOR) with a suite of literacy tools, decodable texts, and culturally responsive classroom libraries. How is it responsible for the state to deny all teachers, administrators, and Boards of Education across Connecticut any decision-making power? Instead, you are forcing them to use programs which have no track record of success. There are only 11 districts in the state who have begun implementing these commercial basal programs, that look like “readers” from years ago; a blast from the past that did NOT improve reading. There is no district in the state that we can visit having success with these programs. When we have asked to see the data and the classrooms that use these “recommended” programs, no such data or place exists. If you’d like to see an exemplary reading, phonics, and writing workshop model that is literacy rich and sets the foundation with the science of reading, come to Groton.
3. Meanwhile, most Connecticut districts have early literacy and English Language Arts curriculum models that have demonstrated that they are exemplars. The data from Columbia University’s Teachers College Readers Writers Project (TCRWP) demonstrates success in student performance in Groton, in the state, and at a national level. Over the past three years, TCRWP has studied the science of reading research, as well as all the other important new

research, and incorporated that research into their NEW K-3 Units of Study in Reading, Phonics, and Writing, and into a new series of decodable books. Groton teachers are working with TCRWP literacy experts in the area of the science of reading and ensuring there is transfer of the foundational skills into reading, writing, and research. With this level of support, as evidenced in our Reading Waiver, we are prepared to showcase a model curriculum in literacy for the state. The CSDE has always done the work of supporting districts with aligning curriculum to the Connecticut Core State Standards (CCS), while facilitating the design of model curriculum with teachers, administrators, and experts in the field. Unfortunately, they have missed that opportunity in literacy K-3 or literacy at all. Algebra 1 was completed at the beginning of the implementation of CCS, and some other mathematics model curriculum has been rolled out, but that is not enough. Give your 169 districts the autonomy to do what is right for students (post-pandemic) and we will show you what our students can do and how they can read and write!

As Superintendent of Groton Public Schools, along with my colleagues in Alliance Districts, Southeastern Connecticut, and across the state through Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), we believe that all students should have the right to read. We have a sense of urgency to accelerate learning and provide the essential foundational skills to assist our students as readers, writers, and speakers. As the instructional leaders of our schools, we believe in the Science of Reading - phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension.

1. We believe that all students should be reading by the end of grade 1 and reading independently by the end of grade 3, but we realize that there are obstacles that could impact their reading performance. There will always be students who need more support than the core instruction, whether intervention or enrichment, with various programs that address their specialized languages, needs, and/or disabilities. One size does not fit all!
2. We believe in a strong literacy curriculum, and through the Reading waiver process, we will showcase this model curriculum for CSDE so that they can develop a model reading curriculum for the state. This work has not been done yet K-3.
3. We believe that all school leaders and teachers should be trained in the Science of Reading. CAPSS has already trained over 200 school teams in MasterClass. Professional Learning in the Science of Reading for every teachers and administrator in the state of Connecticut should be provided and funded by the state.
4. Highly qualified literacy interventionists, reading consultants, classroom teachers, and trained tutors must be available for all children, especially those who are struggling. That should be the mandate. **Selected commercial reading programs are not the magic bullet. They de-professionalize teachers and should not be mandated as "one size fits all".**

Please listen to the educators from across the state, many of whom have years of experiences and multiple certifications across disciplines and grade levels. We will do what is right for our students. I would like the legislature to consider convening a group of reading experts and Superintendents to make recommendations for the next session on how Science of Reading is best implemented statewide, giving some consideration to these points.

Thank you,



Susan L. Austin
Superintendent
Groton Public Schools